



10 Misconceptions about Aging

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An old adage is again proving true: *What we think will happen, happens*. As we age, we become what we think we will become.

That is the thesis that Yale University Associate Professor of Epidemiology and Psychology Becca Levy has been researching for almost 20 years. Having positive images about aging (wisdom, self-realization, satisfaction, and generally being vital and robust) versus negative images (useless, helpless, and devalued) is associated with a 7.5-year difference in average lifespan.

The Journal of the American Medical Association suggests seniors with a positive bias are 44 percent more likely to recover from a bout of disability.

Being optimistic, diligent, and having the will to live are important characteristics of folks whose prognosis improves, no matter how bad the diagnosis. Those who are overwhelmed, pessimistic, negative, and expect the worse typically have the outcome they anticipate.

Dr. Levy was interested in perceptions of those over 50 about growing older. She followed a group of 660 adults from 1975 to 1998. At the beginning of the study, they completed a survey designed to elicit stereotypes about aging. Statements such as, "things keep getting worse as I get older," and "as you get older, you get less useful," were answered positively or negatively.

Those participants with positive scores outlived those with negative scores. People with a positive bias were more likely to exercise, eat well, limit alcohol, be non-smokers and have had preventive health care. All of these good characteristics are consistent with taking control of one's life.

Every day, 10,000 baby boomers turn 65. These folks represent 13 percent of our population. There is great potential in keeping this older group engaged, productive, and contributing to our overall quality of life.

When we think of old age, we tend to predict a slowdown, picturing a person napping in a rocking chair. The fallacy of judging another person's state of mind, actions, or behaviors based on our own experiences, state of mind, actions, or behaviors propagates the misconceptions about aging.

There is no typical "older personality." Our basic personality is formed probably before six months of age, but is modifiable. Those are two underlying concepts as we look at 10 common misconceptions about aging, as outlined by Dr. Donald E. Risenberg in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

Misconception #1: Older persons aren't interested in the outside world. The over-65 age group uses the Internet a lot. Far from being passive TV watchers, more than 100,000 of those 65-75 and older have been frequent travelers, using Elderhostel to better understand other cultures around the world. Staying involved educationally has also been a focus of many colleges and universities who have designed programs for older residents or for the aging adult who want to learn while on vacation. And many people, either by choice or necessity, stay involved in the workforce beyond the typical retirement age.

Misconception #2: Older people don't want or need close relationships.

We are social creatures. Families, tribes, teams, and whole organizations have a better chance of survival and actually thriving when they are socially connected. The need for meaningful relationships does not change with age. However, there may be fewer people to relate to as we age, and there may be physical and mental barriers which arise with age. Maintaining social relationships allows older adults to reap numerous rewards—intellectual challenges, maintaining information processing skills, feedback, and just plain sharing of feelings.

Misconception #3: Older people contribute little to society.

With years of personal skills and professional expertise, older adults are highly valued employees and colleagues as well as volunteers. Senior Corps has 500,000 volunteers who contribute to their communities by mentoring, helping small businesses, assisting in placing foster children, and other valuable endeavors. Older workers have a strong work ethic, and are great mentors and models for younger generations.

Misconception #4: As you age, you get more set in your ways.

Older people tend to have high levels of mental resilience. The older generation's ability to accept and rebound from adversity has been demonstrated many times. For instance, Outward Bound was founded when the British Navy noted the rates of survival among older sailors in World War II were much higher than those of younger sailors. Sharing skills such as self-confidence, self-sufficiency, and the general attitude of toughness found in the older sailors helped the young sailors thrive.

Misconception #5: Mental and physical deterioration are inevitable in old age.

There is a certain amount of loss of function as we age, but much can be done to prevent (or at least slow down) the physical and mental aging processes. Stem cells lose some of their potential and other cells weaken, but healthful habits ameliorate the process. Weight lifting helps retain muscle and bone integrity. Aerobic exercise and diet lessen the chances for physical and mental deterioration. Exercising the brain and continuously learning helps to fight cognitive deterioration. Too much TV watching is bad at any age but is particularly unhealthy for older adults, who often see their generation stereotyped as being feeble, forgetful, cranky and confused. What you think will happen, happens.

Misconception #6: Older people are impoverished.

The good news about older Americans' financial situation is that their average income rose over the decade from 1999 to 2009, while the number of older people living in poverty fell. However, certain groups are still struggling. African-Americans and Hispanics have a nearly 20 percent poverty rate. Among older Hispanic women the rate was 33 percent; for older African-American women, nearly 50 percent. Being on a fixed income as inflation takes its toll is a liability for older folks.

Misconception #7: Older people are not interested in sex or intimacy.

Positive sexual relationships were found to be associated with overall well-being. Whether one caused the other is unclear but the mutual benefit is real. Individuals' sexual activity remains constant until about age 70. Most of the older folks who were surveyed said that sex became less important, but only 35 percent said that sex was only for married couples, and less than 10 percent said sex was only for the young. Women ranked sex as less important than men and also had more difficulty finding partners, as men typically predecease women.

Misconception #8: Older people can't make good decisions about important issues.

Age brings wisdom. Cognitive skills are based on a lifetime of experience and education. Shared decision-making—whether about a medical choice, financial decision or anything else related to an older person—should involve that person. Participation by everyone will improve outcomes.

Misconception #9: Older folks have lost their desire to live.

Older folks become accepting of death when they have some sense of control over it. A comfortable and controlled environment is desired by most. Well people want to live and live well. No one who is mentally stable desires to shorten his or her life.

Misconception #10: Science has answered all our questions about aging.

We have so much more to learn and experience. As we live longer and better we will face even more questions which will stimulate us to seek answers. Consider: 90-year-olds are the fastest growing group in our country. Mark Twain supposedly said, "*Age is an issue of mind over matter. If you don't mind, it doesn't matter.*" We mind, and it does matter. Think positively and you can live longer and better.v

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